

# Report

Date September 9, 2025  
Subject Chemainus Off-leash Dog Area

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## **PURPOSE**

To present Council with the results of public engagement regarding potential solutions to conflicts at the off-leash dog area located at Field 3 in Chemainus Baseball Park, and to seek direction on identifying a suitable alternative location on municipally owned land.

## **BACKGROUND**

Field 3 at Chemainus Baseball Park currently serves dual purposes as a seasonal off-leash dog area from September 1 to March 15, and as a baseball field for the remainder of the year. This shared use has resulted in ongoing conflicts between user groups, particularly during seasonal transitions.

In 2004, Council designated several areas, including Chemainus Lake Park, Herd Road Park, Osborne Bay Park, Chemainus Ball Park, Kin Beach Park foreshore, and Maple Bay Beach foreshore, as off-leash areas for dogs on a one-year trial basis. The latter three locations were restricted to seasonal off-leash use. Following positive feedback and high usage during the trial period, Council permanently designated these areas in 2006 and directed staff to amend the Animal Control Bylaw accordingly. As part of a bylaw amendment in January 2021, greater clarity was provided, formally designating Field 3 as the only off-leash dog area within the Chemainus Ball Park, along with nine other parks and green spaces across North Cowichan.

During the baseball season, the adjacent sports field at the former St. Joseph's School site has frequently been used by dog owners for off-leash activities, rather than other permitted off-leash dog areas. Although the property is privately owned and believed to be for sale, the owner has informally allowed the community to use the space for recreational purposes.

Staff included the potential relocation of the Chemainus dog park in the 2025 business planning process in response to community concerns over the shared use of Field 3, which sought financial support and endorsement from Council. The issue was also a central topic of discussion at the budget open house held in Chemainus on December 10, 2024.

Reflecting continued public interest, Council received a petition at its March 19, 2025, meeting from off-leash dog park users requesting continued seasonal access to Field 3. The matter generated significant feedback from both supporters and opponents. Council acknowledged that staff were actively reviewing the issue and noted that a report outlining options and recommendations would be presented for future consideration.

To better understand the site's history, staff reviewed municipal archives and found that around 1965, North Cowichan exchanged land near Smiley Road and River Road for the property that became the Chemainus Baseball Field. There are no known land use restrictions associated with the exchange, and

the site was likely acquired for community benefit.

Following preliminary investigations conducted in fall 2024, staff began a more detailed evaluation in early 2025 to identify alternative locations for an off-leash area. The focus was on municipally owned land to support timely implementation and cost efficiency. This approach also considered accessibility for Chemainus residents, long-term sustainability, and ease of management. As a result of this work, three potential options were identified:

- a) Retain Field 3 as the off-leash area, but shorten the off-leash season (November 1 to March 15) to extend the use for the fall baseball season.
- b) Relocate to Elm Street, a municipally owned site directly adjacent to Field 3.
- c) Relocate to Elliott Street, near the skate park. This site is also under consideration for a community garden, food forest, and future affordable housing.

To further inform the decision-making process, public engagement was conducted through multiple channels, which included:

- A project page on Connect North Cowichan. This page includes background information, details on the three options, a Q&A feature, and a public survey open from June 9 to July 4.
- In-person engagement took place at the Chemainus Wednesday Market on June 25, where staff spoke with residents, gathered feedback, and answered questions.

## **DISCUSSION**

Youth baseball fields are intended to provide safe, structured environments for children and youth to participate in organized sports. These facilities are typically managed through formal agreements with sports organizations to ensure consistent scheduling, proper maintenance, and adherence to safety standards. As single-purpose-built facilities, they are rarely shared with other sports groups. However, in some circumstances, such as during seasonal transitions, shared use of the outfields can occur with minimal disruptions or conflicts between user groups, such as at Evans Park with soccer users. This type of shared use helps maximize the utility of public spaces and supports broader community access to recreational opportunities. Successful shared use typically involves coordination between user groups and municipal staff to ensure scheduling alignment and field readiness. While shared use is possible in some locations, it depends on field design, surface conditions, and the nature of the sports involved.

Introducing off-leash dog use to these fields presents several challenges. Health and safety concerns include dog waste on playing surfaces, the potential for aggressive or uncontrolled dog behaviour near sports field users, and damage to turf, all of which can compromise the quality and safety of the field. These risks are especially significant in youth sports settings, where cleanliness and player safety are critical.

Conflicts between user groups often arise when the shared use of recreational spaces is not clearly defined or consistently enforced. This issue became more pronounced with the expansion of the baseball season later into the fall, increasing the likelihood of overlap with other recreational activities, particularly between off-leash dog owners and sports field users. While clear signage is posted onsite to help guide users and provide clarity around permitted use, enforcement remains challenging. Without established schedules and expectations, overlapping use can lead to frustration and tension. Best practices generally discourage off-leash dog activity on youth sports fields unless robust management measures are in place to address health, safety, and operational concerns.

To better understand community perspectives, North Cowichan conducted both online and in-person engagement. The project page received 686 views and 575 visits, resulting in 182 completed surveys and 18 submitted questions through the Q&A feature. In-person engagement at the Chemainus Wednesday Market on June 25 attracted approximately 50 participants, whose feedback largely reflected the themes identified through the online survey.

Survey respondents included a mix of dog owners (54%), off-leash park users (34%), ball field users (32%), and nearby residents (66%), with 76% residing in Chemainus. Key findings include:

- 80% of all respondents and 90% of ball field users support relocating the off-leash area.
- Only 11% support maintaining the current shared-use model or adjusting the seasonal schedule.
- Among those supporting relocation, 41% prefer Elliott Street and 39% prefer Elm Street.
- Desired features for a new off-leash area include secure fencing (79%), year-round access (67%), and space to run (56%).
- Top concerns about shared use include uncontrolled dogs (67%), feces/urine (63%), and aggressive behaviour (58%).

More information and details are included in the What We Heard Report in Attachment 1.

### **Assessment of location options**

To address ongoing conflicts between off-leash dog park users and youth baseball participants at Field 3 in Chemainus, three location options were identified. Presented in no particular order, each option was assessed based on community feedback, operational feasibility, and alignment with best practices for recreational space management. A map illustrating the general location of each site is provided in Attachment 2.

#### **Option 1: Retain Field 3 with adjusted off-leash season**

This option would maintain Field 3 as a seasonal off-leash dog area but shorten the off-leash period to better accommodate the baseball season (e.g., November 1 to March 15).

##### **Pros:**

- Maintains a familiar location for dog owners.
- Requires no new capital investment.
- Allows continued use of an existing designated area.
- Provides a large space for off-leash dog users.

**Cons:**

- Does not fully resolve user conflicts.
- Field damage and safety/playability concerns will persist.
- Shortened off-leash season does not meet community preference for year-round access.
- Does not provide a permanent location for a year-round off-leash dog park.
- Is inconsistent with best practices that discourage dog use on sports fields.
- Should St. Joseph's site be sold, current off-season off-leash dog use could be jeopardized.

**Option 2: Relocate to Elm Street (adjacent to Field 3)**

This municipally owned parcel could accommodate a fenced, year-round off-leash dog area that meets most of the desired features captured from the survey.

**Pros:**

- Provides a dedicated, year-round space for off-leash use.
- Eliminates conflict with youth sports.
- Proximity to Field 3 may ease transition for current users.
- Includes adequate length to support space for dogs to run.
- Municipally owned land supports cost-effective and timely implementation.

**Cons:**

- Requires capital investment for fencing, signage, and amenities.
- May require minor site preparation or grading.
- Potential concerns from nearby residents regarding noise or traffic.
- Smaller than the current off-leash dog area on Field 3.

**Option 3: Relocate to Elliott Street (near skate park)**

This municipally owned site is under consideration for other community uses, including a community garden, food forest, and future affordable housing development.

**Pros:**

- Provides a dedicated, year-round space for off-leash use in a central location.
- Eliminates conflict with youth sports.
- May complement other community amenities if co-located effectively.
- Municipally owned land supports cost-effective and timely implementation.

**Cons:**

- Competing land use priorities with future planned development.
- Requires capital investment for fencing, signage, and amenities.
- May require minor site preparation or grading.
- Potential concerns from nearby residents regarding noise or traffic.
- Considerably smaller (84%) than the current off-leash dog area on Field 3.

Survey results indicate strong support for relocating the off-leash area, with a clear majority of respondents opposing continued shared use of Field 3. Safety, cleanliness, and user conflicts were the top concerns. Among those in favour of relocation, there was also a strong preference for purpose-built spaces that offer secure, year-round access for dogs. This feedback aligns with best practices and reflects a community interest in solutions that support both recreational needs and the safe use of Field 3 for youth baseball.

Each option presents trade-offs between cost, community benefit, and long-term sustainability. Staff suggest prioritizing options that align with best practices, specifically avoiding shared use of youth sports fields, and that utilize municipally owned land to minimize costs and expedite implementation. \$20,000 is allocated in the 2025 Parks capital budget for the fencing required.

All relocation options will require an amendment to the Animal Responsibility Bylaw to update the description of the designated off-leash dog area.

## **OPTIONS**

1. **(Recommended Option)** THAT the Committee of the Whole recommend that Council directs staff to:
  - a) Establish a year-round off-leash dog area at the Elm Street location, substantially in the location shown in Attachment 2; and,
  - b) Revise the Animal Responsibility Bylaw to remove Field 3 as a designated off-leash dog area and add this location.
2. THAT the Committee of the Whole recommend Council directs staff to:
  - a) Establish a year-round off-leash dog area at the Elliott Street location, substantially in the location shown in Attachment 2; and,
  - b) Revise the Animal Responsibility Bylaw to remove Field 3 as a designated off-leash dog area and add this location.
3. THAT the Committee of the Whole recommend Council direct staff to retain Field 3 as an off-leash dog park and:
  - a) Adjust timing to accommodate expanded baseball season (November 1 – March 15) and revise the Animal Responsibility Bylaw to reflect the seasonal timing change; or,
  - b) Retain the current seasonal timing (September 1 – March 15).
    - No changes to the Animal Responsibility Bylaw would be required.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

THAT the Committee of the Whole recommend Council directs staff to:

- a) Establish a year-round off-leash dog area at the Elm Street location, substantially in the location shown in Attachment 2; and,
- b) Revise the Animal Responsibility Bylaw to remove Field 3 as a designated off-leash dog area and add this location.

Report prepared by:

*Shaun Mason*

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Shaun Mason  
Manager, Parks and Forestry

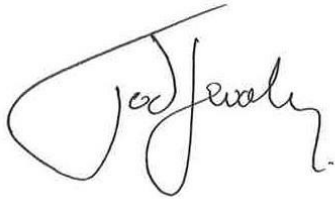
Report reviewed by:



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Neil Pukesh  
Director, Parks and Recreation

**Approved to be forwarded to Council:**



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Ted Swabey  
Chief Administrative Officer

Attachments:

- (1) What We Heard Report - Chemainus off-leash area engagement
- (2) Dog park location map